

Vatican abuse summit: Expert blasts denial on global dimension of crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 7, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- One of America's leading experts on the Catholic abuse crisis effectively told church leaders from different parts of the world today that if they think sexual abuse is not a problem in their neighborhood, they're kidding themselves.

Church leaders around the world began by saying, "This is only an American problem," Monsignor Stephen Rossetti told a Vatican symposium this morning. Then, as more cases surfaced in other countries, they said, "This is an English speaking problem." Then, as the circle of abuse cases widened, they expanded it to: "This is a Western problem." The boundaries were pushed back farther and farther.

"Each time, church leaders said, in effect, "It doesn't happen here," Rossetti said.

Rossetti, former director of the St. Luke's Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland, which treats abuser priests, has written widely on the crisis. He said that in reality, all the available data, based on studies by secular experts, concur that child abuse occurs at the same high rates across the various continents.

"If there are people in the church today who are thinking that this is not a problem in their country, I urge them to speak to those who work with children," he said. "Contact those who generously run programs for abused children or staff child abuse hotlines. Find out what is being said behind closed doors."

Rossetti's remarks came as part of a four-day symposium on clerical sexual abuse, titled "Towards Healing and Renewal." The audience is largely composed of bishops and superiors of religious orders from around the world, who have until May to comply with a Vatican mandate to come up with anti-abuse policies if they don't presently have them.

"Any denial of the frequent sexual molestation of minors around the globe is an echo of the very denial perpetrators use to keep their evil hidden," Rossetti said. "When we fail to expose this evil to the light of day, it continues secretly to pollute the church from within."

In terms of how the Catholic church should respond to abuse, Rossetti raised a caution about policies which encourage rapid laicization of abuser priests, meaning formal removal from the priesthood. Rossetti suggested that at least in some cases, a better strategy may be removal from ministry but keeping the priest on the books, thereby providing church leaders more leverage to insist on supervision and treatment.

"If priest-perpetrators are dismissed from the clerical state, they are completely out of the church's control and so the best we can do is hope that civil society will supervise them," Rossetti said. "However, most offenders are not successfully prosecuted in civil courts."

The overriding criterion for deciding what to do, he argued, should be what's most likely to keep children safe as opposed, Rossetti said, to "demonizing" the offender.

Along with ticking off a series of mistakes the church has made historically in dealing with reports of child abuse, such as being conned and manipulated by abuser priests, Rossetti issued a series of twelve recommendations.

Those recommendations are:

1. A Victims First policy. Every investigation should begin with listening to the victim. The victim, not the perpetrator, ought to be the first focus of the church's attention.
2. Church leaders should not handle these cases by themselves. They ought to have a panel of child sexual abuse experts in criminal investigation, law enforcement, canon law and mental health to investigate and advise the bishop.
3. Proactively determine the truth about child sexual abuse in each country. Develop a comprehensive prevention program and implement it now.
4. To promote the safety of children, and for the good of the offender, those who sexually molest minors should undergo a treatment program informed by modern treatment regimens and designed specifically to address their pathologies. These programs should not only intervene in their offense cycles, but also promote their living a healthy, virtuous life.
5. For the safety of children and the welfare of the offender, the heinous nature of child sexual abuse ought to be widely known, but the offender ought not be demonized.
6. From Benedict XVI: "It is therefore necessary for the church to be vigilant, to punish those who have sinned, and above all to exclude them from further access to children."
7. In countries with functioning and just criminal justice systems, church leaders ought to refer all allegations of child sexual abuse to civil authorities.
8. Develop "Safety Plans" for perpetrators of child sexual abuse that are based upon their level of risk. Supervise these men; keep them away from children; enforce the plans.
9. Develop strong child-safe education programs that will create a climate that helps deter potential abusers.
10. Provide psychosexual screening of candidates for the priesthood to include a comprehensive psychosexual history in a confidential, clinical interview by an experienced clinician.
11. Provide extensive formation and on-going formation in healthy chaste psychosocial and psychosexual living for candidates to the priesthood and for priests. These programs ought to include effective emotional regulation, chaste management of one's sexuality, and the formation of life-giving chaste friendships with peers.
12. Church leaders should be educated on the "Red Flags" that someone might become, or already is, a perpetrator of child sexual abuse. When significant "Red Flags" or boundary violations surface, interventions should restore proper boundaries and assess and intervene as appropriate.

In comments to the press after his presentation, Rossetti offered a mixed assessment of where the church stands vis-à-vis the fight against child abuse.

The Catholic church moves slowly, he said, which means that "children are going to be abused while we're learning, and that's a sad state of affairs."

Yet once the church turns a corner, Rossetti argued, its momentum is basically irresistible.

"When the church finally gets it, and I think it's starting to get it, it will be a powerful force for change," he said.

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